DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 310 527 EA 021 248

AUTHOR Roberts, Jo; Wright, Lance V.
TITLE A Study of the Change Efforts among First-Time High School Principals.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, March 27-31, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Change; Administrative Policy; *Administrator Effectiveness; Change Agents; High Schools; *Needs Assessment; *Principals

ABSTRACT

This paper presents what beginning principals do to effect change in their schools during entry and closure of the first year. The survey instrument, based on a survey of 12 first-time high school principals conducted in five states and on a 1987 study of new secondary headmasters in the United Kingdom, was mailed to new principals in 16 states. The paper addresses the following five questions: (1) What immediate changes do beginning principals report making at the start of their first year? (2) What changes do they make as they progress through the first year? (3) How do they bring closure to the year and make plans for launching the next year? (4) What do beginning principals see as particularly difficult change-related challenges during the first year? and (5) Are beginning principals' change efforts congruent with their vision or needs assessments? The analysis of data reveals that: subjects' early change activities focused on management and climate (morale); later activities focused on management and climate (support); end-of-the-year planning was weak and unfocused; and visions (especially related to instruction) were not achieved. Change was difficult, and principals exhibited a sense of lack of control over student management for instruction, administrative workload, attending to instructional goals, and resistant staff. (16 references) (Author/KM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED310527

A STUDY OF THE CHANGE EFFORTS AMONG FIRST-TIME HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Jo Roberts

Lance V. Wright

University of Colorado at Denver
School of Education
(303) 556-2717

U S DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jo Roberts

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA, March, 1989

EA 021 248

A STUDY OF CHANGE EFFORTS AMONG FIRST-TIME HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ABSTRACT

This paper presents what beginning principals do to effect change in their schools during entry and closure of the first year. Drawing from the results of a national survey, the authors address five questions: (1) What immediate changes do beginning principals report making at the start of their first year? (2) What changes do they make as they progress through the first year? (3) How do they bring closure to the year and make plans for launching the next year? (4) What do beginning principals see as particularly difficult change-related challenges during the first year? (5) Are beginning principals' change efforts congruent with their vision or needs assessments?

The analysis of data reveals that subjects' early change activities focused on management and climate (morale), later activities focused on management and climate (support), end of the year planning was weak and unfocused, and visions (especially related to instruction) were not achieved. Change was difficult, and principals exhibited a sense of lack of control over student management for instruction, administrative work load, attending to instructional goals, and resistant staff.

The research discussed in this paper was supported in part by the Research and Development Center on School Improvement at the University of Florida and the Colorado Principals' Center at the University of Colorado at Denver. For their help in either gathering data reported or sharing insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper, the author would like to thank the other members of the research team: Sheila Bridges, Joan Curcio, Gene Hall, William Hedges, Forrest Parkay, Michael Rao, Jo Roberts, and Theresa Vernetson. Special thanks goes to research assistants Armistead Webster, Stan Dunlap, and Mardella Milton, and to Mary Lynn Christel, Secretary, Colorado Principals' Center.

A STUDY OF CHANGE EFFORTS AMONG FIRST-TIME HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Introduction

"The principal has no set of priorities except to keep small problems from becoming big ones. His is a continuous task of crisis management. He responds to emergencies daily. He is always on call. All problems are seen as important. This global response to any and all concerns means he never has the time, energy, or inclination to develop or carry out a set of premeditated plans of his own. Containment of all problems is his theme. The principal cannot be a change agent or leader under these conditions. (House and Lapan, 1978, p. 145).

"There also seems to be little rank-ordering in the importance of events; everything seems to blend together in an undifferentiated jumble of activities presumably related, however remotely, to the vitality and purpose of the larger enterprise. Management, whatever else it is, is the bridge between the long view and the nitty gritty particulars of organization life. This truism is well illustrated in the secondary school principalship." (Morris et al.,1984, p. 65)

The literature on change is replete with insights into the nature of change including references to planned organizational change (Gross, 1971; Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Havelock, 1973; Bennis et al., 1976; Herriott and Gross, 1979; Fullan, 1982; Hall and Hord, 1987; and Firestone and Corbett, 1988), leadership roles and tasks, and dimensions of change. Change research of the 70's and 80's in particular provides cues for understanding the nature of change, and to what extent school settings and personnel are influenced by planned organized change efforts (Firestone and Corbett, 1988).

At the same time, this literature (particularly in education) is predominated by themes of change related to change models (Hall and Hord, 1987) or to innovation of curricula and programs aimed at improving instruction. By contrast, the themes of planned change revealed by this study's findings relate to procedural practices and

patterns which are largely non-programmatic in nature and deemed unworkable by first-time high school principals. The findings are not comprehensive enough to reveal whether the planned change efforts were organized and implemented in the tactical sense, or, if so, to what extent. So, while it is difficult to relate the findings of this study to the change literature in terms of programs, models, and organization, the findings do reflect related, non-programmatic change elements. The findings can also be considered in light of both the nature of planned change and other studies of how principals actually spend their day.

The Nature of Planned Change

According to Havelock's (1973) and Gross' (1971) definitions of change, planned change is a conscious, deliberate effort to improve systematic operations. It significantly alters the status quo, is intended to be beneficial, and represents something new (Wright, 1984, pp. 19-20).

The major discovery of educational researchers in the 1970's regarding planned change was the complexity of the process of change at the school and the district level (Firestone and Corbett, 1988). Fullan (1982, p. x) described the management of social change as a multivariate business which requires us to think of and address more than one factor at a time. He discussed the phenomenology of change (how change is actually experienced as distinct from how it might have been intended) as critical to understanding its complexity. In stating the case further for the complexity of change, Fullan comments that we need to comprehend the dynamics of educational change as a sociopolitical process involving all kinds of individual, classroom, school, local, regional, and national factors at work in interactive ways

(Fullan, p. 4-5). Marris (1975) stated that change involves loss, anxiety, and struggle.

A Principal's Day

Along with the discovery of the complexity of the change process, we can place the results of several studies of how principals actually spend their day. Wolcott (1973), in shadowing one principal for an entire year, found that virtually all of the principal's time was taken up in one-to-one encounters, meetings, and telephone calls. An analysis by House and Lapan (1978) revealed that the principal has 15% of his/her time to spend in his/her office alone. Weldy's time log (1979) for a typical day of one principal shows a continuous stream of one-to-one interactions, telephone calls, and administrative details which occur in one-minute to fifteen-minute clips all day long.

Given the complexities of change and the nature of how principals spend their day, it is apparent that (1) principals do not have large amounts of time to attend to thinking about strategic planning for change, (2) the time they have to plan and implement change is fragmented and, (3) to a great extent their change efforts are frustrated by the simultaneous need to attend to a myriad of maintenance tasks. Implications of these factors are possibly revealed in the response patterns of the five questions outlined below.

The Research Problem

The purpose of this study was to document and describe the efforts of first-time high school principals to initiate change within the school setting. The researchers sought to answer the following questions:

1. What immediate changes do principals report making at the start of their first year?
2. What changes do they make as they progress through the first year?
3. How do they bring closure to the year and make plans for launching the next year?
4. What do first-time high school principals see as particularly difficult change-related challenges during the first year?
5. Are first-time high school principals' change efforts congruent with their vision or assessment of needs?

Procedures

The data analyzed in this study were gathered as part of the Beginning Principal Study (BPS) currently being conducted by a team of two researchers at the University of Colorado at Denver in collaboration with seven researchers at the University of Florida's Research and Development Center. The purpose of the two-year (1987-89) study is to document and describe the experiences, challenges, and keys to success common to the first-time high school principal. In addition, the BPS team will develop research-based systems of support for future beginning principals as well as a model training program for the high school principalship.

To learn about the backgrounds and experiences of first-time high school principals, a survey was developed based on findings from an earlier, in-depth BPS case study analysis of 12 first-time high school principals in five states. In addition, the BPS survey was patterned after a national study of new secondary headmasters

(principals) conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research in England and Wales (Weindling and Early, 1987).

The BPS survey was designed to gather the following kinds of data: (1) descriptive information about the respondents and their schools; (2) open-ended responses keyed to the research questions; and (3) responses to Likert scale items related to the principals' perceptions of student needs, "internal" and "external" problems and issues, and time priorities.

Subjects for the BPS survey were selected through a two-stage sampling process. In the first stage, the Chief State School Officer in each state and the District of Columbia was sent a letter outlining the goals of the BPS and requesting a mailing list for first-time high school principals in his or her state. Twenty-eight (28) states plus the District of Columbia responded. A surprising number of those contacted were unable to provide such a list, and they knew of no agency in their state that might have such information.

In the second stage, the BPS team selected 16 states from the 28 according to the following criteria:

1. They were geographically dispersed throughout the country;
2. They ranged from densely populated to sparsely populated states;
3. Some had professional development programs for first-time high school principals;
4. Some had highly active, visible administrator associations.

Results

Three change-related themes were coded in the data: immediate changes effected by principals at the beginning of their first year; changes made by principals as the year progressed; and key steps the principals took for ending the year and launching the next school year. In addition, scaled items reflecting the principals' needs assessments, internal and external difficulties, and time priorities were coded. Finally, all data were analyzed to determine the presence of additional minor change efforts made by principals during the first year.

Immediate Changes

The analysis of data revealed that, upon selection to the principalship, the subjects attempted immediate changes in three areas. First, 33% of the principals concentrated change efforts in the area of student management. Student discipline, including such changes as developing codes of conduct, initiating in-school suspension or detention programs, controlling student movement on campus, and ensuring student cooperation through disciplinary procedures, was most frequently reported. Controlling student attendance and developing attendance policies or procedures was the next most frequently cited change effort. In addition, handbook development, scheduling changes, and instituting no-smoking policies and regulations were mentioned. In all cases (except one in which corporal punishment was being abolished) it was the negative/corrective side of student management, perhaps better named student control, which was the focus.

Second, the subjects' early change efforts were often centered on matters of school climate, with 20% of the principals recording an emphasis in this area.

Openness, positiveness, ownership and involvement, and developing the best possible school "atmosphere" were of primary importance to the subjects. In general, the thrust at this time for new principals was one of morale-image-spirit for the whole school. Even personnel issues tended to involve merely changing hiring practices, making transfers, and reassigning personnel. However, few change efforts focusing on counseling, self-esteem, academic help, or extra-curricular activities for students were reported.

The third area of early change efforts was instruction. Ten percent of the subjects cited change efforts in evaluation or related instructional areas (supervision, staff development, feedback on classroom observation). Only two subjects cited early efforts to clearly emphasize instructional improvement as they made changes in the school.

Mentioned infrequently as targets for early change efforts were general planning for school improvement, restructuring, agreeing on goals or mission, or developing a strong administrative team (5%).

Important to the discussion of early change efforts by first-time high school principals is the phenomenon of deliberately waiting to make changes. Reasons included deliberation ("take time to understand the dynamics," "look over the situation," "spending most of the first year listening, getting to know the staff, systems, perceived needs, culture"); directives from superiors to go slowly when hired, being hired just hours or days before beginning the job, a need for stability in the school, the principal's time being consumed by implementing the existing program, and no need to change ("If it ain't broke, don't fix it.").

Later Changes

As the year progressed principals effected different types of changes. The emphasis of later changes for 10% of the principals was on student management, but this was offset by a major change in the climate change efforts.

In the later part of the school year, principals reported fewer morale-image-spirit items and more support-for-school-and-students items as targets for change. Good communication, efforts to gain parent and community support, and empowerment of staff (but with accountability and responsibility) were cited by 20% of subjects. Personnel decisions were more likely to include staff firings, removals and reorganizations. In addition, 30% of the subjects named specific processes and programs to help students as being the focus of their later change efforts (rewards, academic help, student council, counseling, drug and alcohol programs, advisors, etc.).

Changes focusing on instruction were reported with approximately the same frequency as early in the year, but included more references to curriculum and staff development changes than to observation and evaluation efforts. One subject reported that in the later part of the year instruction "took a front seat."

Almost 20% of the subjects who otherwise completed the survey left the later changes question blank.

End of the Year

Finally, subjects were asked what key steps they had in mind for ending the current year and launching the next year. From this part of the survey, two themes emerged, one negative and one positive.

Positive plans for ending the year and planning for the coming year included organizing and planning around goals (9%); focusing on changes in curriculum, staff development, accreditation recommendations, test scores, and evaluation processes (5%); and planning changes around review and analysis of the current year (5%).

Negative approaches to ending the year and planning changes for the upcoming year included what the researchers called survival, ambiguity, and autocracy. Over 10% of the subjects responded to the question by noting that they just wanted to get through the year, to end the year without incident, or survive through graduation or the last day. All of these "survivial" responses carried a distinctive negative or stressed flavor. Some subjects cited seemingly insignificant details like holding an organized (teacher) check-out system. An additional 7% responded by indicating that they just wanted to manage to end the year positively or with some kind of social event to maintain morale.

Responses in the "ambiguity" category included vague, blank, unfocused, or nearly indecipherable notations regarding closure and planning. For example:

"Next year we will decide what to do."

"...use new ideas."

"...fewer problems."

"...keep in touch."

"...maintain the same level."

"...decide later."

"...keep progressing."

Twelve percent of the subjects responded with ambiguity or blanks.

The "autocracy" responses (3%) were characterized by responses such as:

"...and then preview what I have in mind for next year."

"...prepare them for changes planned."

"I will set goals and communicate them."

Taken together, responses of survivial, ambiguity, and autocracy constitute nearly 25% of the sample. The import assigned to these responses by the researchers is based on two factors. First, the question clearly called for a specific answer focused on imminent closure and preparation for the coming year. Second, the survey was administered late in the year, when principals would almost certainly have moved forward on this front.

In addition, 4% of the subjects indicated plans to leave the principalship at the end of the year. In no case with these subjects were any plans for closure or the next year mentioned. Several of these were characterized by the comment, "the demands are unreal."

Additional Related Data: Vision, Difficulties, and Critical Challenges

Vision. The subjects reported what they considered most important in determining the needs of students. The top seven items, all rated as "important" to "very important," included:

1. facilitating the growth of intellectual curiosity;
2. attending to students who are below test norms;
3. protecting the freedom of the individual;
4. facilitating the growth of a free society;
5. addressing mandates of the state and federal government;

6. encouraging the pursuit of happiness; and

7. meeting the expectations of parents.

It appears that the subjects' early change efforts (primarily along the lines of student management, and to a lesser degree climate and instruction) were only minimally congruent with the vision of the beginning principal. Later change efforts were somewhat more related to vision in that student needs were more specifically addressed as the school year progressed.

Difficulties. Subjects reported internal difficulties, external difficulties, and time priorities for the year.

Internal difficulties: Moderately serious to serious internal difficulties reported by the subjects included range of tasks, communication, consultation, previous principal, large number of decisions, discipline, and establishing priorities. In that all change efforts were concentrated on student management, climate, student needs (later), and, to a lesser degree, instruction, it appears that internal difficulties were congruent with change efforts.

External difficulties: While no external problem was considered more than moderately serious, and external difficulties overall were rated significantly less serious than internal difficulties, beginning high school principals did not focus change efforts in these areas. Image, parents, getting information, policy issues, information about decision-making in the district, getting information about other schools, and coordinating with feeder schools were rated as minor to moderate problems.

Time priorities. The subjects reported placing important "emphasis" on supervision and evaluation of teachers. Curriculum and program development and evaluation, community relations, discipline, parent and community member issues, and administrative team building were rated with average to important emphasis. Thus, for the most part, where change efforts were made, considerable time was devoted (instruction was a notable exception).

Critical challenges. Beginning high school principals reported critical challenges of their first year most frequently in the areas of student management, personal overload, instruction, and, most seriously, in the general area of mobilizing frequently strong, resistant, experienced teachers (or clearly unmotivated teachers) with whom the new principal often lacked credibility. Resistance to change per se was noted by several principals. For example:

> "(The most difficult task was) introducing changes and ideas for change...and finding the right balance of fast and moderate-paced change."
>
> "(There was) very little (humor). We have had a polarized faculty all year due to a variety of reasons. Change is difficult."

The identified difficulties not only represent change efforts in themselves, but since they were reported by subjects as "most difficult," they may have also impeded related change efforts.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study described what beginning high school principals do to effect change in their schools during entry and closure of the first year. The results indicated that the change efforts of the subjects focused primarily on management and climate issues, with little planning for improvement at the end of the year. In addition, the principals' change efforts largely resulted in a sense of lack of control over their major responsibilities.

Major findings and conclusions include:

1. Beginning high school principals' early change efforts cluster around student management and climate issues related to control and development of a positive atmosphere. Later in the year beginning principals focus less on student management and more on climate issues related to support for the school and students. Thus the later efforts are more closely aligned with their vision. In addition, this implies that there are prerequesite conditions to developing supportive student programs: management of students, discipline and attendance expectations, knowledge of and compliance with school rules, and informing parents of the same and related issues. While these may be considered low-level operations they may also be critical to being able to focus attention on student needs, in much the same way a teacher must have control of a class and a positive classroom atmosphere before teaching and learning can occur.

2. Concurrent with the beginning principal's change in climate focus (from morale-image-spirit to support-for-school-and-students) is a tendency to increasingly "empower" and "involve" staff as well as to hold them accountable and responsible

later in the first year. At the same time, beginning principals report that staff consultation and handling resistance (which may actually derive from the principal's poor attempts to "empower" or cope by ascribing responsibility), is at least difficult, at most critically challenging during the first year.

3. Whether at the start of the year or later on, only 10% of beginning high school principals report change efforts directly related to instruction. While the area of concentration changes from evaluation and observation to the somewhat larger focus of school-wide curriculum and staff development, instruction is still a relatively minor change activity. This contradicts the priority beginning high school principals place on supervision and evaluation. Its cause may be general administrative overload and/or deliberately avoiding changes which the principal perceives as potentially threatening to staff. In any event, the larger purpose of this educational enterprise is lost among the daily details of high school administration.

4. A significant portion of beginning high school principals report virtually no early change efforts. While they may be consumed by early control and atmosphere-building issues, it is also possible that they (a) have little understanding of how to proceed in assessing the school and planning for improvement or (b) deliberately postpone making what they report as potentially threatening (to staff) changes. In similar fashion, beginning high school principals may report no later change efforts because of the weight and pressure of high school administration demands -- or from a lack of long-range planning and understanding of managing the flow of the academic year.

5. Few beginning high school principals close the year with comprehensive evaluations of the year and resultant planning for the next year. A significant portion suffer from quantitative overload (critical short-term or continuing incidents, technical [work volume] overload) and lack of administrative awareness or knowledge to the degree of sliding uneventfully out of the year or merely planning to dictate future direction to the staff.

6. The change-related critical challenges reported by beginning high school principals suggest an inability to provide instructional leadership, particularly in the face of overload. This indicates an inability, yet a need to control critical elements of leadership and management under a wide range of influencing conditions. Planning for change, achieving the vision, managing the load, and mobilizing the staff and students for instruction are especially complex and challenging for first-time high school principals.

7. It may be that many beginning high school principals fail to carry out their instructional leadership role (and related changes) because of the same factors which prevent their more experienced colleagues from doing so: "a weak knowledge base in curriculum and instruction, fragmented district expectations, territorial treaties negotiated with teachers, and the diverse roles played by the principal" (Hallinger and Murphy, 1987).

Recommendations for Preparation Programs

This study suggests several recommendations for principal preparation programs and for support systems for first-time high school principals during their entry into the school year.

Recommendation 1: An understanding of, support for, and emphasis on, the complexities and difficulties of the change process should be built into preparation programs and into district support systems for beginning high school principals.

Recommendation 2: Aspiring principals and assistant principals should be given guided opportunities to deal with (a) the complexities and difficulties of implementing change in schools, and (b) the typical quantitative and qualitative overload of tasks faced by principals.

Recommendation 3: Learning to tolerate ambiguity, to delegate, to organize, to confer, to collaborate, and to plan (so they gain a sense of control in practice), may be essential administrative competencies which should be emphasized in preparation programs. Mentoring from experienced successful principals may be helpful.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on a sample of beginning high school principals from 16 geographically dispersed states with a range of populations, professional development programs, and administrator associations, the findings of this study raise questions which future researchers could address. (1) In what ways do high school principals' change efforts change beyond their beginning year? (2) What are the relationships between the identified change efforts and designated indicators of success as a first-time high school principal? (3) How does a beginning high school principal's change efforts contribute to shaping his/her professional identity (role/task, etc.) during and beyond the first year?

References

Bennis, W.G. et al. 1976. (3rd ed.) The planning of change. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Firestone, W. and Corbett, H.D. 1988. Planned organizational change. In Boyon, N. (ed.). Handbook of Research on Educational Administration. White Plains, New York: Longman, Inc.

Fullan, M. 1982. The meaning of educational change. New York: Teachers College Press.

Gross, N., et al. 1971. Implementing organizational innovations: A sociological analysis of planned educational change. New York: Basic Books, Inc.

Hall, G. and Hord, S. 1987. Change in schools: Facilitating the process. New York: State University of New York Press.

Hallinger, P. and Murphy, J. 1987. Assessing and developing principal instructional leadership. Educational Leadership, 45(1), 54-61.

Havelock, R. and Havelock, M. 1973. Training for change agents. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan.

Herriott, R.N. and Gross, N. 1979. The dynamics of planned educational change. Berkeley, California: McCutchan.

House, E. and Lapan, S. 1978. Survival in the classroom. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Marris, P. 1975. Loss and change. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Morris, V.C., Crowson, R.L., Porter-Gehrie, C., and Hurwitz, E., Jr. 1984. Principal's in action: The reality of managing schools. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill.

Rogers, E. and Shoemaker, F. 1971. Communication of innovations. New York: Free Press.

Weindling and Early 1987

Weldy, G. 1979. Principals: What they do and who they are. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Wolcott, H. 1973. The man in the principal's office. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Wright, L. 1984. A research-based model district administrative internship program. Unpublished dissertation.